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TAGS: [KPRP](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [IS](#) [IA](#) [IR](#) [LE](#) [UK](#)
SUBJECT: IRAN: SAFAVI CLAIMS KHAMENEI WILL HOLD HARD LINE,
BUT U.S. ELECTION RESULTS MAY GENERATE INTERNAL NUCLEAR
DEBATE

REF: A. 07 LONDON 3923 AND PREVIOUS
[1](#)B. EMBLONDON (GAYLE) E-MAIL 4/23/08 TO NEA/IR
(WOOSTER)
[1](#)C. LONDON 2169 AND 07 LONDON 3700

Classified By: Political Counselor Rick Mills for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary: Senior Iranian cleric and IRGC figure Salman Safavi told a private dinner, attended by Embassy London Iran watcher (Poloff), that Supreme Leader Khamenei will ease or harden the tone of Iran's nuclear policies based on who wins the U.S. presidential election. Safavi gave no specific indication any U.S. election outcome or political gesture would prompt Iran to abandon its current nuclear program or objectives. Safavi appeared to suggest the Tehran regime is ready to engage in contacts with the United States, but provided no details of how such contact might occur or what specific outcomes or negotiating objectives might be. Nor did Safavi seek any private one-on-one contact with Poloff, as he had during previous encounters.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary con't. In broadly surveying Iran's current politics, Safavi argued Iran's key political divide is between "reformist conservatives" and "IRGC leadership," and that "Khatami reformists," though they may put up candidates in national elections, have been marginalized. Safavi claimed that Iran would be open to general outreach by the U.S. and would approve a USG request to open a diplomatic interests section in Tehran. Safavi was openly critical of Ahmedinejad, though he cited few specifics.

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Summary con't. In three additional meetings Poloff had September 17, 25, and 29 with two non-Iranian UK intermediaries who see Safavi frequently, the intermediaries passed on to Poloff additional comments by Safavi on political conditions in both Iran and Israel. End summary

Venue

[1](#)4. (C) Ayatollah Syed Salman Safavi, brother of ex-IRGC commander Rahim Safavi, as he had done previously (ref A), attended a small private dinner, held in early September and hosted by Next Century Foundation, an NGO well known to Safavi and to Embassy. Safavi sketched for a small group of London-based diplomats and academics Iran's current internal politics, with special emphasis on the nuclear issue. Unlike two earlier NCF events at which he had met privately with Poloff, in 2007 and 2008 (ref c), Safavi did not seek one-on-one contact with Poloff. Safavi, however, remained in London for some time; Poloff continued until late September to receive, via a mutual acquaintance, limited additional private comments from Safavi on Iran's politics; Safavi returned to Iran in early October.

Claims New Alignment of Iranian Factions

¶15. (C) At the August dinner session Safavi discussed in detail his view of the impact the U.S. presidential election results will have on Iranian internal politics. For general context, and without labeling key individuals, Safavi said the organization of Iran's political factions has shifted, from a "reformists versus hard-liners" axis, to a political scene dominated by the rivalry of "reformist hard-liners" versus "IRGC leadership." Safavi argued the "reformists," who formerly provided the main critique of government policies and officials, have, even though they continue to receive attention in Iran and abroad, been marginalized as leading determinants of Iranian policy and national direction. In addressing the Western group, however, Safavi somewhat inconsistently later (para 10 below) reverted in his terminology to a discussion of "conservatives" versus "reformists."

Interests Section: Ask Us

¶16. (C) On the question of a U.S. interests section, Safavi said the present regime would approve such a step if there were a USG request; he did not appear to qualify his statement.

Effect of U.S. Election Results on Regime Planning

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¶17. (C) Safavi, in response to an audience question he appeared to have been waiting for, said that the results of the U.S. presidential election November 4 would impact Iranian regime election planning: he claimed that, in the event of a Republican Party win, regime planners would become "more conservative everything for us will be simplified." He stated that a Democratic Party win would "create difficulties," as "different parts of the system will debate (their) roles and responsibilities."

Ahmedinejad's Nuclear Role: Bully Pulpit Matters

¶18. (C) Safavi said the Supreme Leader had in early 2008 "given (Ahmedinejad) the nuclear issue," to the extent that the President now has, according to Safavi, the rhetorical lead on nuclear issues, but no authority over Iran's nuclear strategies. Safavi commented, however, that even mere rhetorical leadership, in Ahmedinejad's hands, "in practice affects the power structure" on nuclear matters.

Claims Iran Ready to Engage

¶19. (C) As evidence of what he called Iran's broad willingness to engage the United States Safavi pointed to the appointment of an American university professor as an advisor to Ahmedinejad, to the travel of "some" visitors to the United States, to Iran's "readiness to talk to the United States" in the P5 1 context, and to Iran's readiness to receive U.S. Congressional visitors. He also argued the existence of sanctions "discredit" those (within Iran) who advocate openings to the West.

Nuclear File: Some Say Not Closed

¶10. (C) At a later point in his remarks, Safavi said the regime's official line is that the nuclear file is closed, but he then very pointedly stated that "other parts of the

government think the issue is still open," and stated there is "very strong debate" internally over Iran's current nuclear posture. At yet another point referring to P5 1 requirement that Iran suspend enrichment preliminary to general political engagement, Safavi stated that if an "American" offer is made of "unconditional" engagement, the "taboo on talking with America" will be broken and "anything is possible."

¶11. (C) Safavi claimed he had a "good understanding" of the American political system and of how a U.S. President can be constrained by the system and by circumstance. He argued, however, that "a black man as President" would represent (according to Safavi) a new and important "capacity to change" by the U.S. political system and that an Obama administration "opening" to Iran would in itself create change. He then went on, smiling briefly, to state "diplomacy is business; you give something, you get something."

Khatami, Qalibaf, and Ahmedinejad

¶12. (C) Asked about "reformist" political plans, Safavi opined that if Khatami stands for president Qalibaf will not stand, due to what Safavi said was the likelihood the two, if they both ran, would split the reformist vote. (Comment: it is interesting Safavi argues that the political appeal of IRGC veteran Qalibaf, whom some western analysts classify as practical but conservative, lies with reformist-oriented voters. End comment). Safavi, using the terminology he had previously disparaged, predicted that if Khatami does not stand there will be multiple "conservative" and "reformist" candidates, resulting in a fractured vote and an Ahmedinejad win.

June 2009 Election: No Changes to
Iran's International Hard Line

¶13. (C) Safavi stated that regardless of the result of Iran's June 2009 presidential election, there will be "no big changes" in "Iran's international policies." Safavi stated "all the alternatives (candidates for 2009) have a "security background" and therefore "have security as a priority -- we will apply our historical experience of (the last) 30 years"

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in setting Iran's national priorities. He stated that the sixth Majles (the so-called "reform Majles" of Khatami's presidency) "neglected the security of the country," and intimated its "errors" would not be repeated. He later referred to Iran's electoral practices of intensive screening of candidates (for Islamic and political orthodoxy) and characterized the current Majles as an "appointed" body, rather than an elected one.

Relations with U.S. for Khamenei
Overshadow Nuclear Differences

¶14. (C) Responding to Poloff's question on sanctions, Safavi said the Supreme Leader's 2007 blessing of bilateral talks with the U.S. on Iraq security had been a major signal but that the talks "did not go well;" this purported "failure" plus the further "extension of sanctions" discredited in Khamenei's eyes, according to Safavi, the idea of opening to the U.S. to some extent. Safavi said that for the Supreme Leader the "America file is more important than the nuclear file."

Hezbollah: Hard to Control

¶15. (C) In response to an audience question on Hezbollah, Safavi claimed "we have tried to persuade (Hezbollah)" not to

attack civilians inside Israel.

U.S. Visit, Israeli hostages

¶16. (S/NF) In follow-up meetings Poloff held separately, in September and October with two regular UK citizen contacts (ref b) already known to both Safavi and Poloff, these mutual acquaintances separately passed on to Poloff additional fragmentary comments from Safavi:

-- Safavi feels "beleaguered" by internal political rivalries and tension in Tehran. The UK intermediary commented that Safavi is now far more reluctant than he has been in the past to discuss with the intermediary specific current cases of hostage-taking by Iranian clients of Israeli citizens. He said Safavi had said Livni's coming to power in Tel Aviv could create a "new opening" to discuss such cases.

-- Safavi reportedly said there is an over-arching uncertainty in Tehran about the future and a "high level of fear" over what the international scene may hold in store for Iran. Safavi was reportedly non-specific, but the source commented that in his decade-plus friendship with Safavi he had never seen Safavi so obviously worried and tense.

-- Safavi reportedly would like at some point to visit the United States and brief key, non-official Washington figures (preferably think-tanks) on "who is who" in Tehran, as Safavi feels there is a poor understanding within the USG of Tehran's internal dynamics.

¶17. (S/NF) One intermediary told Poloff he is confident Safavi had within the last several years had contact with Israeli diplomats in London, but that such contacts may have been discontinued due to the possible risks (from Tehran authorities) to Safavi and his family (part of which is UK-based).

Comment

¶18. (C/NF) Safavi, although he has a commanding presence, appeared to be working very hard at the NCF event to maintain his composure and affability and to make himself understood. He seemed very tired, perhaps as the result of workload and/or sustained tension. His English, while accurate, was noticeably more labored than in the past -- at the time of the NCF dinner it had probably been many months since Safavi had been in an English-speaking environment.

¶19. (C) Whether or not Safavi's version of events and trends in Tehran is accurate, Safavi is unlikely to have appeared at the London NGO event without authorization from his brother (ex-IRGC Commander Rehman Safavi, now military advisor to the Supreme Leader) and perhaps from other senior IRI figures as well.

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